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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY MANILA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2633
INFO RUEHZS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCPDOC/USDOC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 2832
RULSJGA/COMDT COGARD WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUSICWP/COMLOGGRUWESTPAC SINGAPORE IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDRUSPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/CJCS WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC

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DEPT FOR EAP/EX AND EAP/MTS
STATE PASS EPA
STATE PASS USAID
USDOC FOR NOAA/NMMS
USDA PASS FOREST SERVICE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV EWWT TPHY EAID SOCI RP

SUBJECT: USG TEAM ARRIVES TO ASSESS PHILIPPINE OIL SPILL

REF: MANILA 03478

SUMMARY

¶1. A USG oil spill response team arrived in the Philippines on August 23 to help the government assess the damage from the oil spilled by tanker "Solar I" in the Guimaras Strait and to plan remediation efforts. The team met with the Embassy's ad hoc oil spill working group, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Philippine Coast Guard, and the Philippine Undersecretary of Defense. The team is now on site inspecting the spill and coordinating with GRP responders. End Summary.

U.S. STRIKE TEAM MEETINGS

¶2. Three oil spill experts from the U.S. Coast Guard and one scientist from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (the Pacific Strike Team or PST) arrived in Manila on August 23. Members of the PST bring years of experience in analyzing and suggesting remedies for oil spills. During a meeting with the oil spill team, the Charge noted that the USG has a long history of cooperating with the Philippines on a wide range of issues including: military coordination; counter-terrorism; and disaster response. This opportunity for the U.S. Coast Guard to work with their Philippine counterparts to address the oil spill will help support this partnership and build capacity within Philippine government agencies.

¶3. The PST then met Transportation Secretary Leandro Mendoza and Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) Vice Admiral Arthur Gosingan at Coast Guard Headquarters. The PCG briefed the PST, Embassy Reps, and two officers from the Japanese Coast Guard, which had deployed a team to Guimaras Island earlier that day. The group viewed fly-over videos of the affected area and PCG outlined its priorities: to salvage or offload the leaking vessel; contain the free-floating oil with booms; continue to apply dispersants; and conduct shoreline clean-up.

¶4. The PST also met Undersecretary Ernesto Carolina from the

Department of Defense. Carolina said Petron had contracted Japanese firm Fukuda Salvage and Marine Works to use a sonar sweep to determine the exact location of the vessel, siphon out its contents, and retrieve the tanker. The tanker sank to an estimated 1,000 meters, but the company can retrieve vessels as deep as 2,000 meters. Carolina remains anxious to receive satellite images to support the ongoing damage assessment. He expressed concern about the disposal of the recovered oil and contaminated material, and the need to obtain booms, skimmers, protective covering for personnel, and other machinery and equipment related to spill clean-up.

CURRENT SITUATION

¶5. The PST and Japanese team completed their first aerial survey on August 24 of some of the affected areas, and witnessed dispersal operations, shoreline clean up, and further oil leaks from the vessel. PST Commander reported that it is difficult to determine the release rate of the bunker oil and estimate the amount already spilled. The PST believes that the assessment phase will take up to seven days. They will analyze the incident, survey the area of the spill, assess available resources, determine response priorities, and suggest options. After this initial phase, the PST would stay up to two additional weeks, if desired by the Philippine government.

¶6. Petron has hired 1,000 local residents for 200 pesos per day (about \$4) to clean up the shoreline. A cadre of volunteers is working without protective gear. Scrubbing off with turpentine afterwards is causing rashes, so local health officials are advising citizens not to participate without protective gear. Guimaras' Governor told the press that 26,000 fishermen have lost their source

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of livelihood. According to the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), damage has occurred in over 1,000 hectares of Taklong Island National Marine Reserve, 200 kilometers of coastline and 1,128 hectares of mangrove forest.

¶7. Post appreciates the interagency support for the PST deployment to help the Philippines with this enormous on-going operation.

JONES